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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the finding aids (e.g., information that provides insight into a group of records in an archival collection) currently used or being developed by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). It explores their practicality and whether and how they can be improved. In addition, the paper analyzes the factors that make it appropriate for NARA to develop computerized finding aids below the series level and for multiples series using word processing or database software. The records used for this study are the master abstracts of certificates of enrollment, certificates of registry, and licenses for merchant vessels that are used to compile vessel histories, as well as the files containing vessel histories developed by the archives staff; the indexes to abstracts of nineteenth century seamen's protection certificates; indexes to missing air crew reports; records of appointments to federal offices; the microfilm publications of the Decimal File of the Department of State; and a list of postmasters. It is concluded that there are many records in the National Archives that could be better utilized if finding aids were put in another format (such as a computerized format) or rearranged in a manner that would address a majority of the requests. Three appended flowcharts identify the decision-making processes of deciding whether to: (1) create or improve finding aids; (2) computerize finding aids; and (3) create new finding aids. (16 references) (MAB)

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Finding Aids - Records - Computers
One Archivist's Search for User-Friendly Reference

by Angie S. VanDereedt

June 6, 1991

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Most archivists who begin working with a group of records for the first time will immediately pose the question: "What sort of finding aids do you have for these records?" Finding aids provide insights to a group of records in an archival collection. They can either be narrative, such as an inventory or reference information paper, or specific, such as an index, box or folder list, or abstract.[1] Finding aids are usually created for two major reasons. First, they assist the archival staff in maintaining intellectual control over the records. Second, they assist in determining if a group of records will provide the staff and researchers with the information they need. As is true with anything created by humans, some finding aids are better than others.

This paper will examine some finding aids currently used or being developed by the National Archives. In the process, it will explore their practicality and whether and how they can be improved. It will also analyze the factors which make it appropriate for NARA to develop computerized finding aids below the series level and for multiple series, using word processing or database software. However, if a textual finding aid would be as efficient, if not more so, than an automated system, that possibility will be considered.

The records used for this study are the master abstracts of certificates of enrollment, certificates of registry, and licenses for merchant vessels (RG 41)[2] which are used to compile vessel histories, as well as the files containing vessel histories developed by the archives staff; the indexes to abstracts of nineteenth century seamen's protection certificates (RG 36)[3], indexes to applications for twentieth century seamen's protection certificates (RG 41)[4], indexes to missing air crew reports (RG 92)[5], records of appointments to federal offices (RG 59)[6], the microfilm publications of the Decimal File of the Department of State (RG 59), and a list of post masters (RG 28)[7].

Even the best written finding aids do not always serve the purpose of the

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[1] For other essays on reference and finding aids see, Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, ed., A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings On Archival Theory and Practice, (National Archives and Records Service, U.S. G.S.A.. Washington, D.C., 1984). Specifically Chapter 6, "Description," and Chapter 7, "Reference."

[2] National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group 41, Records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation.

[3] NARA, Record Group 36, Records of the U.S. Customs Service.

[4] NARA, Record Group 41, Records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation.

[5] NARA, Record Group 92, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General.

[6] NARA, Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State.

[7] NARA, Record Group 28, Records of the United States Posta. Service.

reference archivist. Many times during the course of a week a reference archivist is approached by someone requesting information for which the only finding aids are arranged in a manner that is totally useless without further details, which the researcher cannot usually supply. Archivists have been struggling with this dilemma for decades. The best that an archivist can usually aim for is to develop finding aids in a manner that will allow most people to obtain reliable guidance as to whether and where the information they seek can be found.

The search and sort capabilities of recently developed software make it more feasible to create finding aids which provide maximum information and maximum flexibility in a minimal amount of time. However, entering the necessary data for computerized finding aids is still a time consuming process. The question then arises: "When is it most appropriate and necessary to expend the time to create these finding aids?" This question will become increasingly important as the Archival Information System (AIS) continues to evolve.

AIS is a computerized finding aid which the National Archives (NARA) is in the process of developing to operate as a network system. This would allow other archival institutions as well as private individuals to pose queries concerning NARA holdings through their computer terminal via a modem. The current plans are for access to series and record group descriptions of the holdings of the National Archives through key words supplied by a thesaurus known as "Data Elements 800."[8]

NARA also hopes to provide AIS users with access to finding aids for information below the series level and to multiple series finding aids through a detailed description module. This module would provide access to item lists, folder lists, box lists, or other detailed finding aids through "pointers" within the standard description module. The detailed description module would in turn supply "pointers" directing the user to the series and record group to which the detailed description refers. If the detailed finding aid is not in electronic form, the detailed description module would summarize its contents and inform the user as to which NARA unit possesses the finding aid. If the detailed description module succeeds, the potential for computerized finding aids below the series level and multiple series finding aids will be tremendous. If it fails, detailed computerized findings will still provide NARA staff and researchers with a more efficient means of determining which records will most likely provide the researcher with the desired information.[9]

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[8] Some of the information in this section were obtained through interviews with Mike Pilgrim, Director of the AIS project, NN-C.

[9] For more details, see the "System Concept Refinement Final Report: Revised System Concepts for Detailed Description, Special Archives Description, and Preservation." (Revised Chaps. 3.4, 3.9, and 3.13 for the 10/10/86 AIS System Concept), May 5, 1988, Prepared for the Office of the National Archives under Contract by American Management Systems, Inc. See chapter 3.4., "Revised System Concept for the AIS Detailed Description Module."

There is no definitive answer to the question of when the development of detailed computerized finding aids would be most appropriate, but through evaluations of the series mentioned above, some guidelines for making such a determination have evolved.

Vessel Documents

Vessel documents are certificates of enrollment, certificates of registry, and licenses issued to vessels as proof of their nationality, and the type of trade in which they are permitted to engage. Information on these documents includes the name of the vessel, the managing owner, the name of the master, the vessel type and dimensions, where and when built, date and port of registry, and date and por of the previous and succeeding document. The last document issued to a vessel often includes information concerning the final disposition of the vessel. Vessel histories are typically lists of all documents issued to a vessel during its existence, including the date and port of issue, the type and number of the document, and the reason for the document's surrender.

The master abstracts of vessel documentation are volumes containing information abstracted from the vessel documents by customs officials. The abstracts are arranged by type of document, thereunder in annual segments, thereunder geographically by port, and thereunder numerically by the number of the document issued. Information contained in the master abstracts includes the date and number of the document; name and rig of the vessel; name of managing owner; name of master; reason the document was issued; date, type, number and port the previous document was issued to the vessel; vessel tonnage; and the date, port, and reason the current document was surrendered. These master abstracts are most commonly used to trace the history of the documentation of vessels and to locate existing copies of vessel documentation in the National Archives.

There are currently three separate vessel history files in use which were created from the master abstracts. All are on assorted sizes and types of paper, and all are arranged alphabetically by name of vessel. The first is known as the "Lytle-Holdcamper index" (ca. 10 ft.), which consists of vessel histories for steam vessels from 1790 to 1868. The second is the "New York index" (ca. 26 ft.), which contains slips of paper, each one duplicating the entries in the master abstracts for the port of New York, from 1789 to 1867. The third is the "vessel history file" (ca. 8 ft.), which is a file of vessel histories for all types of vessels from all ports. The National Archives staff frequently utilizes these three finding aids in answering vessel history requests.

When researchers request vessel histories for steam vessels built between 1789 and 1868, the search is frequently a simple case of checking the Lytle-Holdcamper index. However, if the vessel in question does not appear there, then one must check the vessel history file, or, if there is a reference to it in Special List 22, the archivist might wish to start with the New York index. If, after searching all three finding aids, the archivist does not locate any reference to the vessel, then the laborious task of searching through the

master abstracts begins.[10]

Researchers also frequently request information concerning a specific master, crew member, or owner. Unfortunately, none of the finding aids available are arranged by name of master, crew member, or owner. Consequently, researchers are often told that their request cannot be answered unless they can provide at least one vessel name and the approximate dates that the person they are interested in either owned, commanded, or served on the vessel, and the port(s) the vessel sailed from. In searches for crew members the crew lists and shipping articles, RG 41 and RG 36, need to be searched. Consequently vessel certificates are not useful in these cases, except in providing approximate dates and ports for searches of the crew lists and shipping articles.

Another situation occurring with greater frequency is when a researcher requests information concerning all vessels built and/or documented at a specific port. There is no way that an archivist can gather that information with the current finding aids without searching through every one of the master abstracts. This cannot be done by an archivist because the amount of time and effort necessary to collect the information is prohibitive. In one case, the researcher asked to examine the abstracts himself, which because of the high demand for the abstracts in answering other reference requests as well as the unusually large size of the volumes, means that the archivist or a technician must escort the researcher to the stack area where the master abstracts are stored, and remain with him during his visit. Since these types of requests are increasing in frequency, the problem of determining what can be done to alleviate the burden placed on the reference archivists in these cases is growing.

The combination of the finding aids mentioned above are a prime example of how a computerized finding aid, particularly a database program, would assist the archivist in answering reference requests. A database, more readily than a word processing program, can pull together information searched for through any field. Consequently, if the Lytle-Holdcamper index, the New York index, and the vessel history file were combined in one database program, those three finding aids could be searched rapidly for vessel histories, vessels documented or built at a specific port, vessels owned by a specific managing owner, or commanded by a specific master. If the requested information did not appear in the database, then the master abstracts could be consulted, and the new vessel history entered into the database. As the database grows, the frequency with which the master abstracts will be needed will decrease. In the mean time, the National Archives should consider microfilming the master abstracts, so that those requesting information about vessels in specific ports can spend all the time they require looking at the master abstracts, without necessity of a NARA staff member in a stack area.

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[10] Some of the background information concerning the records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation was obtained through interviews with John VanDereedt, archivist, Civil Reference Branch of the National Archives and Records Administration.

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Abstracts of Nineteenth Century Seamen's Protection Certificates

Abstracts of seamen's protection certificates (SPC's) are lists of seamen s protection certificates issued at a specific port during a specified period of time.[11] Seamen's protection certificates are in essence passports issued to seamen to prove their nationality. The abstracts typically include the date and number of the certificate, the name of the seaman, his age, height, complexion, hair color, place of birth, citizenship, and how citizenship was obtained.

Indexes to nineteenth century abstracts of seamen's protection certificates (ca. 1790-1870) in Record Group 36, Records of the U.S. Customs Service, are in five different segments. One is arranged alphabetically by name of vessel (ca. 7 ft.), another is an index to certificates issued to masters arranged alphabetically by last name of the master (ca. 7 ft.), a third is only for seamen departing from New York (ca. 14 ft.), yet another refers to abstracts of various ports (ca. 70), and the last one, currently being created by Rebecca Salonan and Ruth Dixon, volunteers at the National Archives, refers to applications for certificates issued at the port of Philadelphia (the only port for which NARA has nineteenth century SPC applications). The last three indexes mentioned are arranged alphabetically by last name of the seamen. Information included on the index cards consists of the name of the seaman, his age, the date the certificate was issued, the port where the certificate was issued, and occasionally, the name of the vessel he embarked on. Indexes to the abstracts of the seamen's protection certificates often include the number assigned to the abstract from which the information was obtained.[12]

The typical request for a search of the indexes to seamen's protection certificates includes the name, and possibly an approximate date of birth. Consequently, the archivist or technician performing the search must examine all of the indexes, except that arranged by name of vessel, to determine if the abstract or application can be located. Even if the researcher is reasonably sure that the seaman was a master, or that he sailed from a certain port, at least two of the indexes must usually be searched to ensure that the staff has reasonably checked every possibility. In the first case, if the requested name does not appear in the index to masters, then the other indexes should be checked, because they often include citations to masters as well as ordinary seamen. If the port of embarkation is known to be New York or Philadelphia, but the seaman's name is not located in the appropriate index, then the index to various ports should be examined, because some of

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[11] RG 36, Records of the Bureau of Customs, Entry 446: Certificates of Citizenship for American Seamen, 1796-1807 [Salem and Beverly, MA], Entry 882: Proofs for Seamen's Citizenship, 1797-1801 [Fairfield-Bridgport, CT], Entry 1007: Register of Seamen who had Received Protection Certificates, June 21 & 22, 1796 [Perth Amboy, NJ].

[12] Some of the information concerning the nineteenth century indexes to abstracts of seamen's protection certificates was obtain through interviews with John VanDereedt, archivist, Civil Reference Branch, National Archives and Records Administration.

those cards also refer to the New York and Philadelphia documents.

It is obvious that the variety of indexes in this case do not provide the means for an efficient search. The question is what should be done? One possibility is to combine all of the indexes which are arranged alphabetically by last name of seaman regardless of whether or not he was a master. This would reduce the number of indexes to two. Another possibility is to enter all of the indexes in a computer database or word processing format. This would provide a swift and accurate search without concern that the cards would get mixed up (as they often do). For the time being at least, combining the indexes is a more practical solution to the problem. The primary reasoning behind this conclusion is that the indexes are relatively complete. Most of the ports are represented in the indexes to nineteenth century abstracts. Another consideration is that interfiling the existing indexes would take less time and effort than entering all of the information from all of the cards on a computer. Since requests for searches of the indexes are almost always by name of seaman, there is little need for accessing the information through another field. For instance, no one has ever asked for a list of all seamen departing from a given port on a given date.

Twentieth Century Applications for Seamen's Protection Certificates

The twentieth century applications for seamen's protection certificates are similar to the certificates themselves. The applications typically include the name of the applicant, county and state in which they are applying for the certificate, application number, where and when the applicant was born, where and when the applicant was naturalized (if not born in the U.S.), the applicant's occupation, date of initial employment, training information, the applicant's expectant position on the next voyage, the applicant's age, weight, height, complexion, eye color, and hair color, the applicant's federal registration card number, any identification markings, the applicant's address, a statement of citizenship (or intention to become a U.S. citizen), and a signed statement of a witness acquainted with the applicant. Most applications also include a photograph and thumb print of the applicant.

The situation with the indexes to twentieth century applications for seamen s protection certificates is similar to that of the nineteenth century indexes. These indexes cover the period 1916-1940, and the ports of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The New York Indexes are in two chronological segments. The first is 1916-1918, and the second is 1918-1940. Philadelphia indexes include a segment of index cards relating to foreign seamen who received applications indicating their intention to become U.S. citizens, or who received alien identification cards. Like most of the nineteenth century indexes mentioned above, these are arranged alphabetically by name of seaman. The exception is the Philadelphia index to foreign seamen. Not only are the latter not alphabetical, they are also deteriorating and for all intents and purposes, unusable.[13] Information provided on the index cards includes the

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[13] Some of the information concerning indexes to twentieth century applications for seamen's protection certificates was obtained through interviews with John VanDereedt, archivist, Civil Reference Branch, National

name of the applicant, and the date and number of the application.

Again, most of the requests for these records are strictly by name of seaman. It is rare that the port of issue is known by the researcher. Initially the solution to the problem created by these indexes appears to be the same as that suggested for the nineteenth century indexes. Simply combine the four indexes into one. However, there is an additional glitch to these records. Only three ports are indexed. Granted that New York, Boston, and Philadelphia were three of the largest ports in the United States in the early twentieth century, but there were many seamen who received certificates from other ports. Should the existing indexes be combined without further effort, or should we pursue the task of creating indexes for the other ports?

The first piece of information we should ascertain is how the applications for the other ports are organized. Most of the applications are arranged alphabetically by the last name of the seaman, but some ports are arranged numerically by the number of the certificate. Even if they were all arranged alphabetically, one point mentioned earlier should not be forgotten. Most researchers do not know from which port the seaman in question received his certificate. Therefore, it appears that the most practical solution would be to create indexes for the other ports, either on a computer or on index cards, and combine them all so that the port will only be of significance in the search for the actual certificate.

In this case, placing the information in a computer format appears to be the best solution. Since the National Archives now has several lap top computers, entering the information in a computer would take about the same amount of time as writing index cards for the ports that are not indexed. The main advantage to the computer is that the information gathered from the individual ports would not have to be interfiled in alphabetical order. Computerized searches and storage are not alphabet dependent. Even if alphabetical storage is desired in order to simplify searches where the spelling of a name is not certain, a computer can alphabetize information more efficiently than humans can interfile index cards.

Missing Air Crew Reports

Missing air crew reports (MACR's), are reports written by the army-air force during World War II concerning the loss of individuals on board military planes. They usually include the name, rank, and serial numoer of the individual; estimated date, time, and location of the loss, and narrative descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the loss. If witnesses were available, their testimony is included in the report.

The primary finding aid for the missing air crew reports is an index arranged alphabetically by the last name of the missing crew member.[14] The index includes the full name of the crew member, his serial number, and the number

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Archives and Records Administration.

[14] NARA, RG 92, Entry 2109a, approximately 140 linear feet.

of the report. The reports themselves have been reproduced on microfiche, and are arranged numerically by report number. Unfortunately, the indexes are incomplete. If someone is looking for reports of missing crew members of fighter jets, then the possibility of locating the names in the index are fairly good. However, if the crew member in question was on a bomber, a positive result is less certain. For some reason, the larger number of crew members on bombers led to a less accurate indexing of reports for those planes. Another problem with the index is that several of the more famous missing crew members are not in the index. Therefore, names such as Joseph Kennedy, Jr. do not appear there. A final difficulty with the index is that 112 cards were withdrawn from it several years ago and never returned. This increases the incompleteness of the index.[15]

Despite these problems, the MACR index is still among the better indexes in the National Archives. Once a name is found, it is a simple matter to locate the report and make a copy of it. However, the index should be more accessible to the general public. Since the reports themselves are on microfiche, the logical step for the indexes would be to copy them on microfiche or microfilm.

Why not computerize the index? The missing air crew reports are most often requested by name of crew member. Since that is how they are arranged, there is no need to manipulate the data on the index cards. Microfilming the indexes is not as time consuming as entering the information on a computer, and it would permit the researcher to examine the indexes on his own without the assistance of an archivist. The researcher could then request a copy of the microfiche containing the needed report, either in person or through the mail.

A related matter concerns a microfilmed index currently in the custody of the Maxwell Air Force Base History Office. This is a set of three indexes to missing air crew reports. The first is arranged numerically by the military serial number of the plane. The second is arranged chronologically by the date which the plane was last seen, and the third is arranged numerically by the serial number of the machine guns and automatic weapons on board the aircraft. The military has found all three indexes useful. The first two indexes are utilized most frequently by the Maxwell Air Force Base History Office. These indexes provide the MACR number, the Army-Air Force Group or other flying unit, the numbered Air Force (e.g., 8th Air Force), the general geographic area in which the plane was lost, the military serial number of the plane, the date of the loss, and two other numbered fields which the historian at Maxwell Air Force Base was uncertain as to what they referred.

The third index has been referred to in recent months when a few heretofore missing planes were located in Europe. The bodies of the crews were still in

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[15] Information concerning finding aids for the Missing Air Crew Reports was obtained through interviews with Richard Boylan, Assistant Chief, Suitland Reference Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, and James Kitchen, Historian, Maxwell Air Force Base, U.S. Air Force.

them, but deterioration had made them unidentifiable. By examining the machine guns for the serial numbers, the identities of the crewmen were confirmed through the use of the index of serial numbers. Fields included in the third index are the machine gun or automatic weapon serial number and the MACR number. There may be other fields as well, but the Maxwell Air Force Base historian could not recall what they are. It is the first two indexes which he uses the most. It would behoove the National Archives to obtain custody of these indexes (which have been reproduced on two rolls of microfilm) for use in searches for missing air crew reports. They would prove useful in the event of other planes being located, or if a researcher should request the name and related report with only the serial number of the machine gun, or of the plan or by date of loss. Although this may sound far fetched, the Richard Boylan, Assistant Chief of the Suitland Reference Branch stated that such requests have been made in the past, and will most likely reoccur.

Computerizing the four indexes is not necessary. As with the eighteenth century seamen's protection certificates, the index to the missing air crew reports can be searched efficiently enough on index cards or in microform. The amount of time and effort it would take to computerize the indexes, as opposed to filming the alphabetical index and obtaining the three indexes currently at Maxwell Air Force Base, would not warrant computerization. The indexes are nearly always searched in the order in which they are arranged. Need for access through other fields is minimal, so the search and sort capabilities of a computer are not necessary.

Appointment Records

Entry 370, "Card Record of Appointments Made from 1776 to 1933" (37 ft.), 1934-1953 (12 ft.), 1953-1960 (3 ft.), and 1961-1968 (5 ft.), are often used to verify that an individual held a fairly prominent position in the federal government, or to locate the commission of an officer of the federal government. Another common reason for referring to them is in the course of a searches for files in another series, Letters of Application and Recommendation in RG 59, General Records of the Department of State. If the researcher does not know when the person applied for a position, the index to appointments can often provide an approximate time period for the search.

This index stands alone as a record. The information contained on each card usually includes the full name of the individual, where the person was from (state and sometimes the city), date of birth, date and nature of appointment, if the appointment was to a foreign service post the location of the post is included, date which the person either resigned or was relieved from duty, and if the person died while holding the office, the date of death is included. This information is repeated for every federal office held by the individual.

The index is arranged alphabetically by last name of applicant. Most requests in which the index is used are by name of applicant. However, it might be useful to manipulate the index in a manner which would allow the archivist to quickly determine if there is a file for the individual in the Letters of Application and Recommendation. Since the index was created at the Department of State, it is not proper archival practice to annotate the individual cards to indicate whether or not there is a file in the applications and

recommendations. However, if the information on the cards could be entered into a word processing program on a computer, an indication as to whether or not there is a related file among the Letters of Application and Recommendation which could be added for a more efficient search. A computer program could easily be updated with each new accession of indexes and applications files. It could also alleviate the need to interfile the new set of indexes with the old one to provide a single source search of the indexes, rather than necessitating a search of both sets.

The reason a usable index for the letters of application and recommendation is so essential is the nature of the filing system. The only existing indexes created specifically for the letters of application and recommendation, cover the period 1797-1877 (Entry 332), and arranged in the same manner as the records themselves. Entry 331, Letters of Application and Recommendation for Public Office, are arranged in eight year blocks from 1797 to 1901, and alphabetically by name of applicant. Entry 333, Applications and Recommendations for Appointments to the Foreign Service, are in a single block from 1901 to 1924, and alphabetically by name of applicant. The arrangement of the records does not pose a problem as long as the approximate date of the application is known; however, if it is not known, then the index to appointments saves a tremendous amount of time and effort. Therefore, computerizing the currently existing indexes, while adding the information concerning which presidential administration received the application, could significantly improve the effectiveness of the indexes.

Microfilm Publications

Over the years, the National Archives and two private micropublishers have microfilmed many segments of the Department of State central decimal file. The decimal file (RG 59, Entry 196) is a central correspondence file arranged in chronological segments (e.g., 1910-29, 1930-39, 1940-44, 1945-59, 1950-54, 1955-59), and thereunder according to a decimal filing scheme. After 1950, the file designations for some of the countries and subjects changed, leading to some confusion for those conducting research in early and mid-twentieth century State Department records.

The National Archives has published several microfilm catalogs of all of its microfilm publications, and one catalog specifically devoted to its microform publications of the records which were in the custody of the former Diplomatic Branch of the National Archives. The private companies have given copies of their microfilm publications to the National Archives so that researchers can use the microfilm instead of the original records. One type of microfilm publication has been designated as M microfilm, which can be duplicated by NARA for researchers. The other type, C microfilm, cannot be copied by NARA for seven years. Unfortunately, several problems arise from these circumstances.

First, separate lists of microfilm publications results in many places to check for information concerning which records are available on microfilm. Second, any catalog or listing produced by the National Archives or a private company tends to be out of date almost as soon as it is printed. Until recently, the National Archives produced microfilm of its records in a fairly

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systematic manner. This frequently resulted in new microfilm publications, which were not in the latest catalog. Since there is often at least two years between National Archives microfilm catalog publications, each catalog becomes obsolete long before a new one is published. At the same time, private companies frequently chose State Department records for their microfilm projects, but those publications sometimes included more than one file segment or time period. Again, since they were constantly filming, each new list was outdated almost immediately.

Most researchers who approach archivists with requests for records from the State Department decimal file request the records by subject, not by decimal number. As a result, the archivist often has to consult the classification manual which describes the filing scheme for the time period in which the researcher is interested, then check the National Archives microfilm catalog, the update lists, and the binders containing lists of LM and C microfilm in order to determine if the records have been microfilmed, by whom, and whether copies can be made. This is a laborious task, especially considering that the end result is usually little more than a yes or no answer.

Milton Gustafson, Chief of the Civil Reference Branch, created a list of State Department records on microfilm, including library and contract microfilm, on a spreadsheet program. His fields include the publication number, date span of the records, the country name, decimal file number, file title, roll numbers, microfilm publisher, whether or not the microfilm can be copied by NARA, the location of the microfilm, and references to available roll lists. Unfortunately, spread sheet programs do not provide the efficient search capabilities provided by database and word processing software.

The best solution to the problem of determining which records have been microfilmed is to enter the information concerning National Archives and private microfilm publications of the decimal file in a computer database program. This would allow for fields providing the decimal number, time period, the countries signified by the decimal number, the subject referred to by the decimal number, who microfilmed the records, the publication citation, which rolls of the publication contain the decimal number of interest, and whether or not NARA can copy and sell the microfilm. Computerizing the information would also allow for quick and easy updates without waiting for new catalogs. By using a database rather than a word processing program, the microfilm listings could be searched by any single field or combination of fields. Therefore, anyone wanting all microfilmed records relating to a certain country during a particular time period, or records of a specific topic for any country, would be able to determine, with a reasonable amount of assurance of the currency of the information, if and where the microfilm can be obtained.

Appointments of Postmasters

Records of appointments of postmasters, 1789-1832, are lists of postmasters appointed to post offices all over the country. The records include the date of the establishment and the date of discontinuance of the post office, the changes of name, and the names and appointment dates of the postmasters. They are generally arranged alphabetically by post office. Most of the records on

which the finding aids discussed below are based are reproduced on National Archives microfilm M1131, which consists of four rolls.

Arthur Hecht, a former employee at the National Archives compiled a single list of the appointments for the above-mentioned time period using the Record of First Returns Received from Postmasters, October 1789-July 1818 (RG 28, Entry 67), Records of Appointments of Postmasters, 1815-1832 (RG 28, Entry 68), and Letters Sent by the Postmaster General, October 27, 1793-March 26, 1800 (RG 28, Entry 60). Hecht's list includes the name of the post office, name of the postmaster, appointment date, the source of his information, date that the post office was established, date that it was discontinued (where applicable), and where and when the name was changed (where applicable).

The major pitfall of Hecht's list is that it cannot be searched for names of appointees. Requests from researchers vary from complete histories of specific offices, to records of the appointment and service of a particular postmaster. In order to improve the efficiency of answering these requests, the Computer Support Staff created a database program using DBase III for Hecht's list.

Tom Stanton, a National Archives volunteer, is using the program to create a finding aid to assist with requests concerning postmasters and post offices. In the process, Stanton is double checking Hecht's information and correcting the mistakes he finds. The fields in the program include the name of the postmaster, date of appointment, location of the post office by state and region, the source of the information, when the post office was discontinued (where applicable), and when and to what the name was changed (where applicable). The information can be retrieved by name of postmaster, location of post office, or state. Such a program should prove very useful for some of the most common requests concerning the Records of the U.S. Postal Service. Those interested in the history of a certain post office, or a particular postmaster, or in the post offices of a specific state will be able to obtain an easily readable listing from this database. This should considerably reduce the amount of time required to provide reference service for these requests.[16]

Conclusion

There are many records in the National Archives which could be better utilized if finding aids were put in another format or rearranged in a manner which would address a majority of the requests. If reference archivists were asked to give serious consideration to the ways in which current finding aids could be improved, or new finding aids would be particularly useful, a number of feasible suggestions would result. The key would be in giving the archivists enough time to think about and produce the recommendations in writing, providing general guidelines as to what is considered feasible, and in giving

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[16] Information concerning the database finding aid for the postmasters was obtained through interviews with Tom Stanton, National Archives volunteer, and Aloha South, Assistant Chief, Civil Reference Branch, National Archives and Records Administration.

them assurance that all plausible suggestions would be pursued in greater detail.

Computerized finding aids are the most flexible form of finding aid. Whether created with word processing or database software, the information entered into a computer is not arrangement dependent. Searches can be performed relatively quickly, and with the right software program, even approximate spellings, or related information, not specifically mentioned, can produce useful results. Determining when to use a computer to solve a finding aid problem is not always a simple matter.

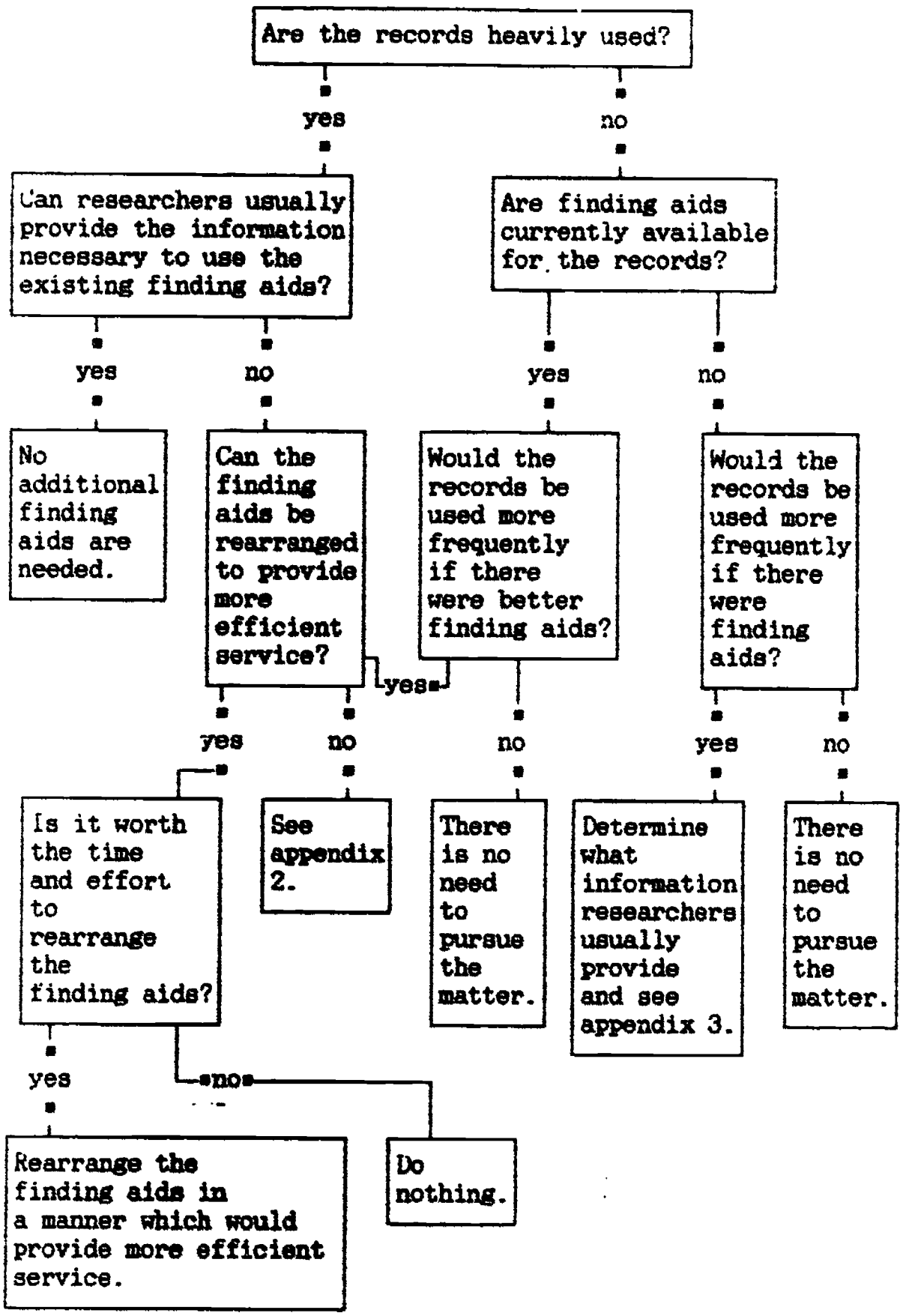
Manual finding aids are not obsolete. As mentioned in reference to the nineteenth century abstracts to seamen's protection certificates and the missing air crew reports, it is not always necessary to computerize existing finding aids. Nor is it necessary to use a computer to create new finding aids. The three appendices attached provide some guidelines as to how to decide when it is appropriate to consider creating, improving, or computerizing finding aids. These appendices were developed in the process of examining the examples of records described above in an effort to create a logical sequence of questions which should be considered while attempting to answer the question, "When is it appropriate for NARA to create computerized finding aids for records below the series level and for multiple series?" In each case, appendix 1, "Deciding Whether to Create or Improve Finding Aids," should be examined first. That appendix provides guidance as to whether or not the other two appendices need to be consulted. It is hoped that with the help of these guidelines, NARA staff will take a closer look at the records and consider the possibilities for making them more accessible.

Whether it is decided to computerize a finding aid or to manually create a new finding aid, considerable effort is always involved. Volunteers have proven to be both willing and able to create finding aids for reference archivists, provided they are given adequate instructions. Many times, as is the case with Tom Stanton and Ruth Dixon, the volunteers come to the National Archives with prior knowledge of the records. This makes their task more enjoyable, and easier on the archivists who work with them. Use of volunteers to either input data or create index cards, box lists, or folder lists would relieve the NARA staff of the necessity of finding the time to create the finding aids themselves, while using the free resources of interested individuals.

If volunteers are not available for finding aid projects, the archivists should consider the following: Creating finding aids for records which otherwise would be inaccessible in the long run saves the archivist time and effort. This is particularly true for records which are in demand, yet difficult to service. New and better finding aids provide those who create them with a sense of accomplishment, while easing the burden of archivists of today and tomorrow. Improved finding aids also lead to improved reference service, which satisfies researchers, and boosts the image of the National Archives.

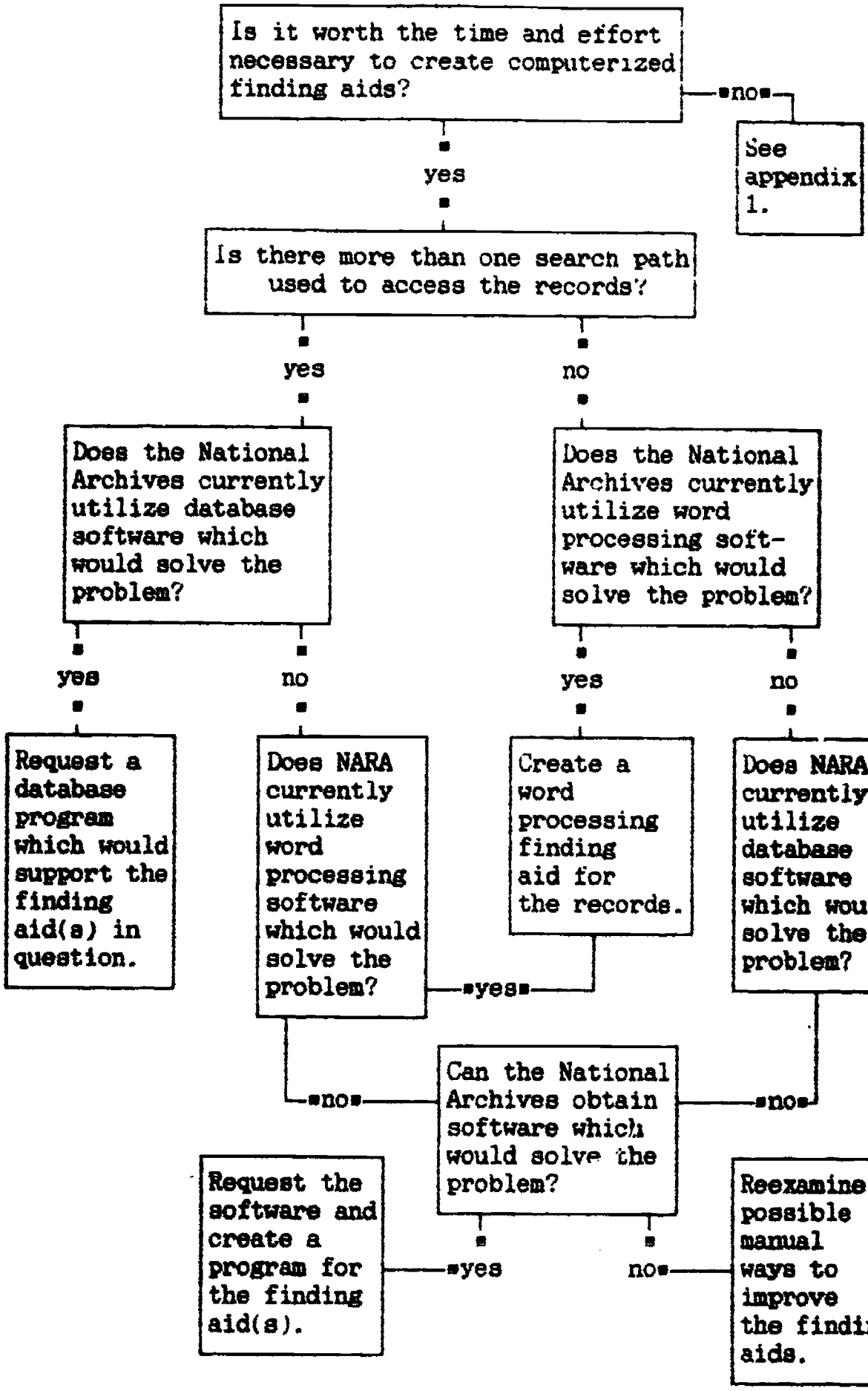
Appendix 1

Deciding Whether to Create or Improve Finding Aids



Appendix 2

Deciding Whether to Computerize Finding Aids



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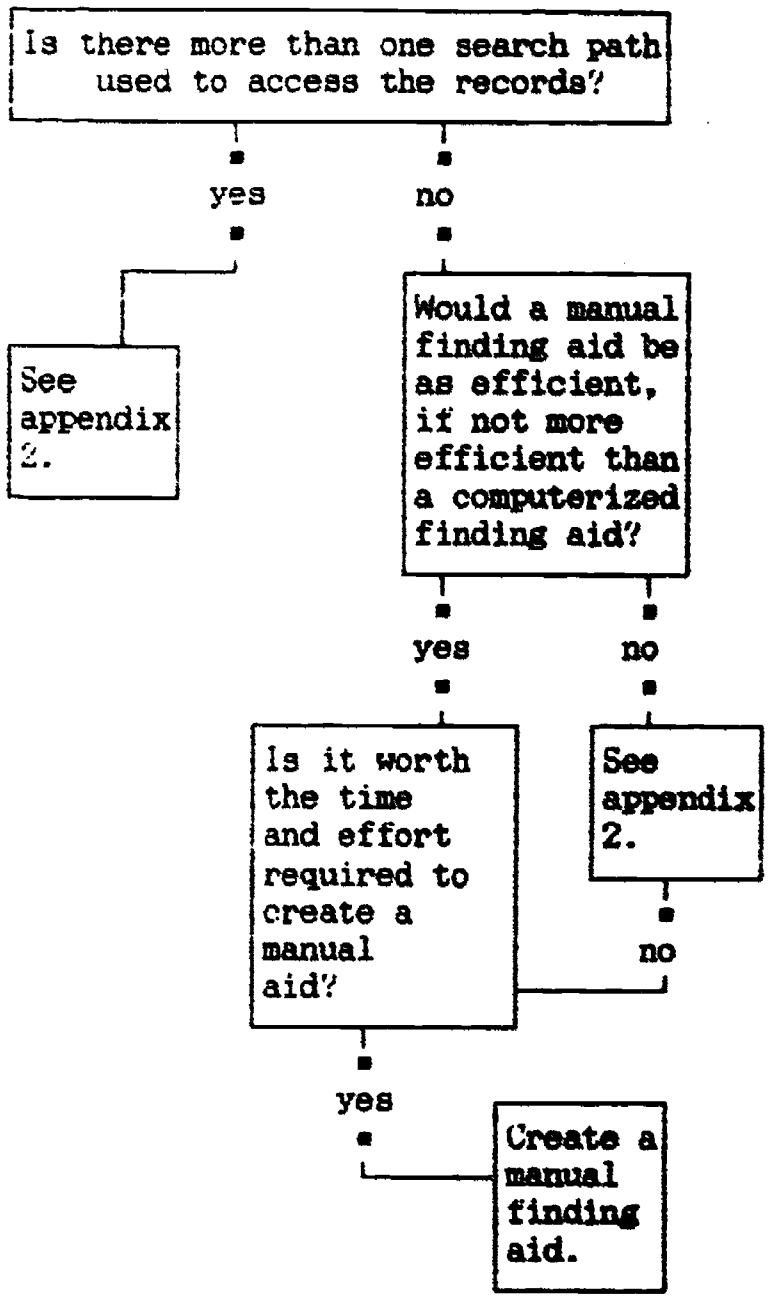
Appendix 3

Deciding Whether to Create New Finding Aids